DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 237 FL 018 452

AUTHOR Lindstromberg, Seth
TITLE (Re)Teaching Prepositions.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Diagrams; Foreign Countries; *Prepositions; *Remedial Instruction; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Spatial Ability; Translation; Verbs; *Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

Prepositions appear to be especially susceptible to misunderstanding by second language learners. Even upper-intermediate and advanced learners may have ingrained misconceptions. A proposed method for re-teaching prepositions to students at all levels is based on three ideas: (1) prepositions are spatial; (2) they are frequently used metaphorically; and (3) the spatial character of the metaphors can be made clear by simple diagrams illustrating direction and/or relationship. Two exercises to be used with this approach are: (1) diagramming and re-diagramming texts; and (2) translating diagrams. The first exercise involves student diagramming of a text with the prepositions removed. The text is then traded with another student who worked on a different text, and the second student attempts to insert the appropriate prepositions. The class then diagrams the text together on a larger chart. In the second exercise, students diagram prepositions onto a triple-spaced text in the target language. They then translate the text into English. Followup exercises can introduce new verbs in which direction or relationship is a significant part of the meaning. This method creates the idea of a metaphor that can be visualized, rather than of a quirky and inconsistent system. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S. Lindstromberg
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED318237

(Re)Teaching prepositions

Seth Lindstromberg

Pilgrims (Canterbury, England)

There is interesting evidence that even people who seem to be virtually at native-speaker level in a foreign language can, in fact, habitually be mis-interpreting some of its most basic elements (Copieters 1987). My experience tells me that prepositions (including directional adverbs like away and phrasal prepositions like in front of) are particularly troublesome in this regard. I do not think that many experienced teachers would quarrel with this observation. Nor would I be the first to claim that wrong understanding of prepositions is the main source of the difficulties that so-called phrasal verbs present to learners of English as a second or foreign language.

What I will offer here is a method for (re)teaching prepositions which not only seems to get through to the fairly numerous upper-intermediate and advanced learners with ingrained misunderstandings of what certain prepositions mean but also works well with lower level students. The method depends on these insights: (1) Most prepositions are, at root, spatial. (2) They are frequently used metaphorically (e.g., Quirk et al. 1976, 1985). (3) The spatial roots of these metaphors can be made clear by means of simple pictures or diagrams (see especially Lakoff 1982).

I work with diagrams like the ones in the table shown here. To ensure consistency of interpretation, I present the diagrams in family sets (e.g., toward through away (from)) rather than one-by-one, taking care to associate each element of every diagram with something concrete. For example, of the top row of diagrams I might say that the arrows show where someone went and that the ' □ ' is a

FL018452

house with a front door and a back door. I do not, however, make the diagrams themselves less schematic than the ones shown here since it is exactly their lack of detail that makes them versatile enough to use in the ways now to be described.

Activity A -- Diagramming and de-diagramming texts

Before class

1. Find or make two texts of similar difficulty and length (5 to 30 lines), which include the prepositions whose meanings you want to give your students practice in visualizing and discriminating.
2. Make two copies of each text. One copy is single-spaced and ungapped. The other copy is double or triple spaced and has a one inch (4 cm) gap in the place of each preposition (except for, some uses of of and any others you do not wish to deal with in a given lesson).
3. Photocopy class sets of each. Or,

   Write your texts on (four) posters. (Wallpaper shops can often provide odds and ends you can use the backs of.)

In class

4. To half the students distribute both the gapped and ungapped copies of one text. The other half of the students each get both copies of the second text. Each student writes their name on their gapped text. Everyone should have a copy of the diagram table too, or else the diagrams can be on a poster all can see.

   If you have have used posters, you can hang the two different texts (each in its gapped and ungapped versions) on opposite sides or ends of the classroom, with half the class facing one text and

the rest facing the other. Everyone copies 'their' gapped text down on a blank sheet of paper.

5. The students task is to fill each gap with the best diagram. They work individually at first, skipping gaps that puzzle them. When they finish, they check and consult with neighbors working on the same text.

6. As they finish diagramming their gapped texts, all the students swap their gapped text with a student who had a different text than they. That is, every student gets a new text with the diagrams already in it. Also, it avoids some commotion later if the pairs of students swapping texts at this stage now sit next to each other.

7. Referring neither to the diagram table nor to the ungapped copy of the text they are working on, the students try to write the correct preposition above each diagram.

8. As they finish, the 'partners' check and discuss each other's work. They may now refer to their diagram tables as well as their ungapped texts.

Variations

(a) Do not give out copies (or display the posters) of any of the complete texts until after Step 8 has finished. This can lead to more interesting discussion, perhaps in plenary, since in some cases there are other possible choices of preposition than the one used in the original texts.

(b)

Students write their own texts, using diagrams instead of prepositions. Everyone then swaps texts with a partner who tries to 'label' each diagram with a preposition.

(c)

All the students 'diagram' the same gapped text. Afterwards, teacher and class discuss the choices for each gap.

(d)

Diagramming prepositions in texts and labeling texts diagrammed by the teacher can both be test activities.

Rationale for Activity A

1 The diagrams are simple and their forms suggest their meaning (i.e., they are 'iconic'). They are thus readily scannable and easy to remember.

2 They are easy for students to draw.

3 The diagrams make it much easier for students to understand how the use of one preposition rather than another changes the meaning. Their use also makes it much easier for discussions about multiple possibilities of meaning from wandering off track. (Most preposition-focused fill-in-the-blank exercises sweep this whole issue under the carpet since their authors try to create texts with only one correct preposition per blank and then evidently assume they have succeeded in doing this when in fact it is virtually impossible to do with any regularity.)

Example text for Activity A, filled in:

I saw the opening a cave me. I decided go it. As I walked the cave, it got darker and darker. I had a small flashlight, but I soon hit my head something hard and then fell a stone. I got and kept walking . a while I had bend in order avoid hitting

my head again. Soon, though, it began get a bit lighter again. me I could now see a little ray of sunlight coming a crack the end of the cave. As I got it, I could feel a cool draft of air coming it. I stood the narrow beam of light, letting it shine my face. I could hear birds singing . After a while, I turned and walked the entrance.

Activity B -- Translating diagrams

1. Give your students a triple-spaced text in their own language and ask them to draw a diagram above each preposition.
2. They translate the text into English.

Variation

Give them the mother-tongue text with the prepositions (or their linguistic counterparts in that language) gapped. They add the diagrams and then translate the text. The translations will differ in the prepositions used since the gaps in the mother tongue texts are unlikely always to be filled in the same by every student.

Rationale for Activity B

English has more prepositions than most languages. Thus, translating into English often involves choosing difficult choices. For example, French and Spanish use de and German uses von where in English there are several nonsynonymous prepositions, including, of, from, out (of) and off .

Activity C -- Diagramming phrasal verbs

This begins as a very teacher centred activity and is, in fact, a guide to structuring analysis of the various verb/particle constructions commonly lumped together under the term 'phrasal verbs'.

1. Choose a phrasal verb, for example, get by. Find a sentence for it:

   He got by in a dark suit.[1]

2. Use the same verb and preposition in a sentence that shows the literal base, or origin, of the metaphor(s) they express by the phrasal verb. To do this you generally need to put the verb and the particle in a sentence where the particle functions as a preposition with a 'concrete' object. Make no unnecessary changes to subject or the verb form but add any other words that seem to adapt the meaning implied in your original sentence to your new context:

   He got by the guard dressed in a dark suit like the warden's.

3. Diagram the preposition:

   by = o↗

(Note that get generally retains something of its root meaning of, approximately, 'obtain', and highlights the semantic element of 'result'. Here the result obtained is 'He, by the guard'. See Lindstromberg, forthcoming for an argument that get does not have lots of different meanings.)

4. Now, think of your original sentence and brainstorm possible objects of the word by. For example, '[by] the expectation of the people he worked or associated with' or '[by] a dress code of some kind' as in,

In daily life he got by the expectation (of his colleagues that he should dress in lighter more summery colors) in his usual dark suit.

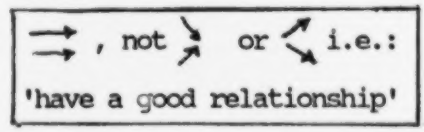
If you have found the sentence in context to begin with, this context will often suggest the right prepositional object and help you in filling out the meaning of sentence. You will often find, I think, that the meaning of the phrasal verb is a metaphorical expression of the prepositional diagram you chose in Step 3.

4. If you have a fairly advanced class, you can ask them to duplicate the above procedure for other phrasal verbs.

Follow on

If you have a class for a few months or more, you can interpret two or three phasal verbs each day in a regular slot.

1. To review and recycle this vocabulary as you teach more and more, it is helpful to build up a collection of large filing cards each, with a phrasal verb (in a sentence) on one side and an appropriate diagram or set of diagrams on the back along with a paraphrase of the phrasal verb, for example:

Side A	Side B
She got along well with all her colleagues.	 'have a good relationship'

2. Each day, repeat a few old cards. First show the phrasal verb side and ask that someone either come to the board and sketch the right diagram or give a good paraphrase.

3. Then show the B sides and elicit the phrasal verbs. (This is harder.)

Note on 'perfective' verbs:[2]

'Perfective' verbs with up (for example, eat up, drink up,...) have a regular and fairly predictable semantic relationship to the bare verbs (eat, drink,...). That is, when something is 'up', a building, say, it is typically completed. Hence the notion of 'completion' in phrasal verbs of this sort.

Perfectives with out, for example, read out, are often easy to relate to the diagram for out. For ones like roll out, the diagram needs only a little modification (e.g.,). In cases like hold out (for something better) the metaphor seems to involve conceiving of an agreement as something you can either come into or hold, or stay, out of.

In phrasal verbs like finish off, the preposition (or 'particle') is, I think, most plausibly understood as being an instance of the metaphor whereby that which is 'on' (as in on a desk/worktable) is still the object of attention whereas that which is 'off' is like something set aside, perhaps on the floor, so as to make room for a new object of work and attention.

Phrasal verbs with over (e.g., overeat, oversleep,...) are often clear cases of the meaning of over shown in the first diagram for that preposition (see the table). We find a variation of this meaning in look over as well. In overlook, however, the meaning of over is that represented by the second diagram (so also the over in There's grease all over the table top).

Note on to vs at:

Present your class with the examples:

He threw the ball at me.

He threw the ball to me.

To exemplify the meaning of the first sentence, draw a huge ball and a little, point-like person. For the second, draw a large person and a realistically proportioned ball. Explain that use of at means that we are thinking of the thing referred to by its object as if it were a point rather than something with size. In this case, the metaphor is that the person is of point-like tininess. The size (and so the dangerousness) of the ball is thus greatly magnified in comparison. Talk at vs talk to are slightly more abstract cases of the same metaphor.

Conclusion

To approach the teaching of prepositions (and their kin) as if their meanings are unpredictable and highly idiomatic is to ignore the high degree of regularity that exists. Teaching prepositions as highly numerous and quirky idioms radically increases the amount that students have to learn. This applies as well to failure to see that the meanings of phrasal verbs derive in large part from the meanings of the particles they contain. Moreover, students who are given the (false) impression that the English prepositional system is perverse and chaotic are only too likely to get discouraged. In my view, the notion of the 'visualizable metaphor' is the only reasonable way forward.

References[3]

Copieters, Rene. 1987. 'Competence differences between native and near-native speakers'. Language, vol. 63/3: 544-73.

Lakoff, George. 1982. Categories and Cognitive Models. LAUT Papers. Trier Series A, No. 96.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1980. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lindstromberg, Seth. Forthcoming. 'Get: not many meanings'. IRAL.

Quirk, Randolf, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik. 1976. A Grammar of Contemporary English. Harlow: Longman.

Notes:

1 This sentence was offered to me as a hard case by one applied linguist.

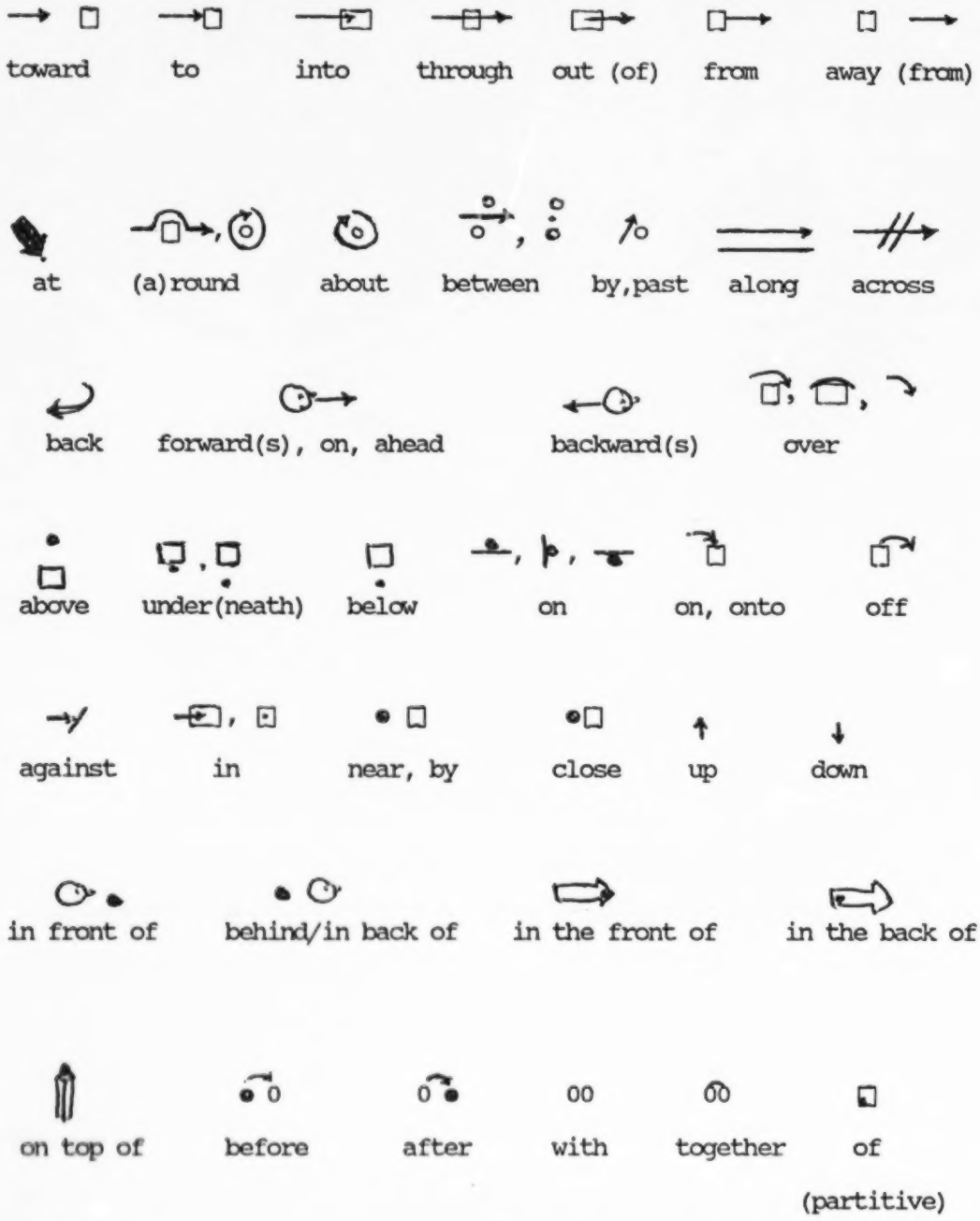
2 See Lakoff and Johnson 1980 for more on the metaphorical signification of perfectives.

3 I am indebted to Graham Low for alerting me to Lakoff's paper.

Seth Lindstromberg has taught English as a foreign language in Japan, Switzerland and England. He currently teaches both for Pilgrims (Canterbury) and Hilderstone College (Broadstairs) in Kent, England. He is also series editor of the Pilgrims/Longman Teacher's Resource Books.

Table

Diagrams of prototypical meanings of particles (i.e., prepositions, and directional and positional adverbs):



Note: These diagrams are best regarded as bases for adaptation. For example, the ' □ ' in the diagram for to, into, etc. can be omitted and the arrow drawn like this: 'They went →town'.